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Capturing the Complexity: Towards a Better Understanding of Collaborative Higher Education Provision in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates collaborative Higher Education (HE) landscape in the United Kingdom (UK). Collaborative arrangements between publicly funded (i.e. with recurrent funding from the Funding Councils or other public bodies) Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other private providers have witnessed a significant expansion since 2010, in terms of student numbers and public-backed student loan support. The focus of this article is on understanding the rationale and complexities around collaborative HE provision involving HEIs and other private providers. This article uses data collected through interviews, involving 19 stakeholders representing collaborative HE provision in the UK.

Keywords: collaborations in HE; funding; HE policy; marketisation

INTRODUCTION

Like many other publicly funded sectors in the UK, the HE sector too has been witnessing major reforms. In the early 1960s there were just 400,000 students at British HEIs, however the number of 17-30 year olds in HE (i.e. participation rate in HE) grew from 12% in the 1980s (Shelley, 2005) to 49.8% by 2016/17 (Department for Education, 2018). Consequently, given the exponential growth of participation rates in HE, successive UK governments either needed to increase the fees and/or public investment in HE (Allen, 2012). However, one of the key reforms that can be observed in the UK HE sector is the gradual but significant change in the key income sources for HEIs. For example, the total reported income of UK HEIs in 2017/18 was £38.2 billion and 47.3% of this income was sourced through tuition fees (Universities UK, 2019). However, the total income of HEIs was £25.3 billion in 2008/2009 and only 27% of this income came through tuition fees (Universities UK, 2010). Thus, as Maringe (2006, p.476) suggests, HEIs were required to effectively position themselves as 'recruiting institutions' to address financial targets.

Collaborative provision in HE refers to arrangements for delivering learning and teaching opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body (QAA: Chapter B10, 2012). HEIs in the UK have recognised that 'their course portfolio and awards have commercial value and have begun to realise some of this value by marketing their courses through collaborative provision' (Hodson and Thomas, 2001, p.102; De Vita and Case, 2003). In this context, current HE arrangements also include publicly funded (i.e. with recurrent funding from the Funding Councils or other public bodies) HEIs with degree-awarding powers forming partnerships with private providers to deliver degree courses, which this paper focuses on.

In the context of UK HE landscape, extensive studies on private HE have been limited as it managed to operate partly outside the public policy framework in the past (Mariampillai, 2014). A study by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013) found that there were 674 private HE providers in the UK in 2012. Most providers were relatively small - 217 of the 674 had fewer than 100 students and only five providers had over 5000 students (Department for Business, Innovations and Skills, 2013). Another extensive study conducted in 2014, identified some 732 alternative providers of HE which between them had somewhere between 245,000 and 295,000 students (Shury et al. 2016). The figures include student numbers where some of these providers had courses with 'designated status' that allowed students with private HE providers to access public-backed tuition fee support. Also, the reports published by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2015 and 2018) identified clear failings in measuring the success and/or risks of widening access to education provision. For example, around £4m of public-backed funds were paid to ineligible EU students. Given this background, HEIs and other stakeholders have begun to realise that working with private providers presents additional challenges and risks, yet collaborative arrangements involving private providers remain an attractive option for UK HEIs.

COLLABORATIVE HE: RATIONALE

According to Kim (2008, p.34) 'university governance in the UK currently can be understood in terms of an explosion in the scale and size of what has to be managed; changes in the way public money is given to universities and how this is monitored; and who manages what, and how'. Kim's observation captures the current characteristics of university governance in the UK and specifically, it describes the contradictory modes of governance, which feature a 'combination of control and disengagement' (Fanghanel, 2012, p.16). Governments across the world have begun to 'reappraise the nature and role of the state' (Henkel, 2007, p.1). Substantial budget deficits and the emergence of New Right ideas promoted responses such as 'privatisation, emphases on efficiency and effectiveness, and managerialist approaches to the public sector' (Bochel and Duncan, 2007, p.15). As Ball (2013, p.173) argues, 'social and educational policies are collapsed into economic and industrial policy' and these policy developments reflected the influence of neo-liberal principles (Ozga, 2009).

In this context, the rise of the 'evaluative state' (Neave, 1988, p.8, 1998, 2004) has entered a new phase; HEIs are being challenged to introduce new structures of governance and accountability (Jongbloed, 2007). Deem et al. (2007, p.6) define managerialism as a 'general ideology or belief system that regards managing and management as being functionally and technically indispensable to the achievement of economic progress, technological development, and social order within any modern political economy'. Scott (2007) asserts that more attention has been paid to developing management capacity in HEIs at the expense of traditional collegiality. I see three important aspects of managerialism that are relevant to this paper (Johnson and Deem, 2003; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Deem et al. 2007). Firstly, it focuses on the attainment of targets (mostly financial); secondly, managerialism introduces ideas and practices that are prevalent in the world of business into the public sector; and finally, managerialism enables the progress of public-private partnerships. In this context, the growth in collaborative HE provision between HEIs and private providers can be seen as a corollary of the phenomenon of managerialism. For example, the collaborative HE provision helps HEIs to achieve their financial targets (Hodson and Thomas, 2001; De Vita and Case, 2003).

Various aspects of the welfare state and of traditional HE have been challenged since 1979, when a Conservative government came to power. Under the Conservatives policy making was largely driven by a commitment to competition and the market (Bochel and Duncan, 2007, p.9). As part of this process, the marketisation of universities has emerged and has its origins in neoliberal politics (Lynch, 2006, p.3). The term marketisation is often used interchangeably. Marketisation is a complex notion often intertwined with various developments and meanings, which I now turn to.

One way of understanding marketisation is related to enhancing student choice and the liberalisation of HE markets to encourage competition. The intense competition generated within the HE market is in return expected to enhance the quality of HE provision to students. This idea is encapsulated in the definition put forward by Jongbloed (2003, p.113) who defines marketisation policies as those that are 'aimed at strengthening student choice and liberalising markets in order to increase quality and variety of services offered by the providers of higher education'. This way of understating marketisation is closely linked to the supply-side drivers in a HE market. Moreover, HEIs orientation towards market principles is often influenced by the continuous state intervention (Brenner et al. 2010). In this context marketisation can also be linked to a process by which the state attempts to create efficiencies within the public sector institutions.

In a more generic view, marketisation could be defined as strategies aimed at generating revenue from private sources (Wangenge-Ouma, 2008, p.458). Teixeira (2006, p.1) states that 'markets or market-like mechanisms are playing an increasing role in higher education', and these policies have an impact on the regulation of HE systems and on the governance of individual institutions. According to Slaughter and Leslie (2001, p.154) 'market-like behaviours refer to institutional and faculty competition for monies' and these competitive behaviours seek to source funds from various institutional activities. They use the term 'academic capitalism' (p.155) to describe the responses and behaviours of public HE institutions. In this context, collaborative HE provision between HEIs and private providers can also be seen as an activity undertaken as part of an increasingly marketised UK HE landscape.

The reasons for establishing collaborations in HE are wide-ranging and institutions (both HEIs and private providers) are motivated by a combination of internal and external factors (Eddy, 2010). For example, Beerkens (2002) observed that the developments in the policy domain and the resulting resource constraints and/or dependencies of HEIs were the key reasons for any inter-organisational arrangements. McBurnie and Ziguras (2001), discussing transnational education (TNE) suggest that market expansion and the aspiration to raise institutional profile are the specific reasons for overseas HE collaborations. However, little has been written on the rationale behind collaborative HE provisions between HEIs and relatively small private providers in the context of UK HE.

So, what are the key drivers encouraging collaborative HE in the context of UK HE? The following section will examine this question, using a component of a larger study (Mariampillai, 2014), with the data collected from a sample of 19 participants representing the public-private HE provision in the UK. In total 19 interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule and the participants were chosen purposively, broadly based on their HE

experience, collaborative HE expertise and the nature of organisation they represent (i.e. university and/or private college and HE policy institution).

COLLABORATIVE HE: EXAMINING THE CONTEMPORARY MOTIVES AND TENSIONS

Key themes emerging from the interview responses capture the marketisation of education and the resulting influence and application of marketing discourse in education (Hemsley-Brown, 2011). These responses highlight the willingness of HEIs to commodify their educational offering (Molesworth et al. 2009).

The drive is market driven. So it's an opportunity for generating income and is part of a diversification strategy (Head of School, University B)

It gave them (HEIs) extra income stream and they managed to get around the limitation [.....] which have been posed quite rigorously (Associate Director/Consultant – College Q)

I think what you can certainly get is product life cycle extension going overseas which is a classic kind of marketing concept and its just an opportunity of actually extending income on the back of an existing course (Head of School, University B).

The responses above capture the extent to which the focus on market(s) and the economic benefits have become key drivers for the establishment collaborative HE with private providers. Gibbs (2001) suggests that HEIs have a moral responsibility to sometimes resist market forces. But as my respondents suggest, at least in the context of collaborative HE, the market has become the key organiser of HE provision. Such collaborations with private providers are, making education as part of the 'private investor's good (Gibbs, 2001, p.93).

Furthermore, on the one hand HEI respondents claim that there is an economic rationale that underpins their motives for collaborative HE with private providers, but on the other hand they are reluctant to establish clear economic rationale.

I think, yes you know working with partners obviously have economic benefits (Director, University W)

Financially I don't think certainly for the business school it's not something that will make huge amounts of money. May bring some sort of revenue but I don't want you to suspect it makes a load of money financially I am not 100% sure at this point (Academic Lead Partnerships - University W).

Their responses highlight some of the conflicting interests that exist within HEIs. This is significant as far as this paper is concerned. The marketised HE environment offers many challenges to academics. Often academics find themselves in a complex situation where they either need to act independently or satisfy the stakeholders' needs and/or expectations i.e. students' needs, the state and management's expectations (Molesworth et al. 2009). Fanghanel (2012, p.115) states that academics' responses towards the policies framing their practice often included a mix of 'adoption and resistance'. Similarly, on the one hand this study results demonstrate the adoption of an economic rationale to justify the establishment of collaborative HE. But, on the other hand, respondents appear to display resistance towards the marketised

HE environment. A closer look at the responses point to deep-rooted beliefs that oppose markets and economic justifications in the provision of education. The responses, as discussed above, show ambiguities on the part of HEI respondents, who had reservations about their role in the new marketised world of HEIs. The responses also described the difficulties that academic professionals encounter adjusting to market conditions and expectations. To discuss further, current HE circumstances warrant universities (HEIs) seeing some economic benefits through education, as White (2007, p.594) argues 'attracting funding and efficiency have become key university performance indicators'. In other words, the difficult financial conditions and the ever changing landscape of the UK HE sector have placed considerable pressures on HEIs. Given these conditions, HEIs' response was to seek solutions through market/s and market-like behaviours. Although not convinced, academics have found themselves playing a role that was contradictory to their moral beliefs concerning teaching and researching (Gibbs, 2001, p.89). They find themselves navigating through territories that are dominated by market-like behaviours. The following reflection from a respondent points to this:

I am an academic.....5 years ago I never used such words (the respondent was talking about markets and costing), 5 years ago I was writing books about Art and now I have to use this sort of language (Head of Collaboration - University G).

So the sector is responding in a way that says this is about survival, we either do this or we don't survive [.....] (Head of Collaboration - University G).

Although the sector is responding to market expectations and economic benefits, one cannot reject the existence of tensions between the academic roles, their institutions' core principles and the economic expectations of a collaborative HE arrangements with private providers. Gibbs (2001, p.89) suggests that education must be contextualised outside the economic market model. Similarly, the responses reflect resistance to the economic market rationale in education.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this explorative study lead to a debate that views collaborative HE as an income 'replacement activity' as opposed to an 'income generation' activity. That is, as discussed elsewhere in this article, the gradual financial distancing of the state, as evident from the shift in the nature of income sources for HEIs has forced institutions to find alternative income opportunities to both address financial deficits and expansion goals. Thus, the expansion of such collaborative arrangements in HE involving private providers should be viewed as a reactive income driven market-oriented approach. Consequently, similar significant expansion of collaborative provision involving private providers offers a space for a dual or two-tier system within HE. That is, collaborative HE with private partners (in the UK and overseas) will increasingly be applied with an economic intent to support other core activities. This gives rise to tensions and complexities - academics find themselves navigating through territories that are dominated by market-like behaviours, but with limited conviction and enthusiasm appear to play a role (reluctantly) that was contradictory to their moral beliefs, identities and roles concerning teaching and researching (Gibbs, 2001, p.89).

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